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**“In the Beginning”:
Genesis 1:1 in Milton’s *Paradise Lost****

GÁBOR ITTZÉS

In *Paradise Lost*, Book 7, Milton offers a close paraphrase of the opening chapter of the Bible. Correspondences are in fact so close that it is possible to argue that the text of the epic is closer to the King James Version than to The Geneva Bible,¹ although those two translations are quite similar. Jason P. Rosenblatt perceptively calls this passage an “interlinear poetic commentary” on “almost every verse” of Genesis 1. He specifies the qualification: “the Bible’s first verse . . . is conspicuously absent from the creation account of book 7” (194). It is relocated, he adds, to the opening lines of the epic (1.9–10).

Rosenblatt goes on to give his explanation: “The propulsive force of that account [in Book 7] imitates the dynamic, evolving nature that never achieves stasis, while the opening lines of both the Bible and the epic describe a completed act” (194). Much as I agree that Milton’s Eden is a dynamic place²—and much as I think that Rosenblatt put his finger on a fine point here—his formulation strikes me as mistaken in significant ways. In fact, it is wrong (or at least imprecise) in practically every possible way it can be—yet it is wrong in very fruitful ways.

I will argue in this paper that Rosenblatt is mistaken in terms of (i) what is missing, (ii) why it is missing, and (iii) where it is relocated. The three mistakes are, of course, interconnected. If one does not know *what* is missing, it is rather difficult to explain *why* it is not there and *where* it is. But Rosenblatt is fruitfully imprecise because answering those questions correctly will help us gain some insight into Milton’s method and his understanding of the beginning.

What is missing?

This is the easiest question to answer, but it still requires careful comparison of the relevant passages. This is what Milton’s reference text, the Bible says: “¹In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth. ²And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness *was* upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters” (Gen 1:1–2, KJV, italics original). Rosenblatt claims that verse 1 is moved to the epic’s first invocation: “In the beginning how the heavens and earth/Rose out of chaos: or if Sion hill . . .” (1.9–10).³ The echoes are clear but limited. The

* Research for this paper was supported by the Hungarian Scientific Research Fund, OTKA (Grant No. K-101928).

¹ See my forthcoming paper in *The King James Bible (1611–2011): Prehistory and Afterlife* volume.

² See my paper “Till by Degrees.”

³ The text of *Paradise Lost* is quoted from Fowler’s revised second edition throughout.

famous opening phrase is surely there as are “heaven and earth” although with slight modifications: both the number and the articles are changed. More important, however, is the shift which makes them the subject of the sentence whereas in the Bible they are the object of God’s creative act. The latter is evoked by the rising out of chaos, which may well be an allusion to the biblical story, but it is hardly more than that. It certainly does not qualify as a verbal echo, let alone a citation. The rest of the passage, as Sion hill signals, leaves Genesis 1 altogether behind.⁴

The corresponding passage in Book 7 reads as follows:

Thus God the heaven created, thus the earth,
Matter unformed and void: darkness profound
Covered the abyss: but on the watery calm
His brooding wings the spirit of God outspread[.] (7.232–35)

Here the parallels are more sustained. “Heaven” and “earth” are separated, but they are in fact the objects of God’s creation. The earth’s qualities—“unformed and void”—are also points of connection between Book 7 and Genesis 1. The deep as well as the spirit of God upon the waters provide further links. Taken together, this passage is closer to its biblical counterpart than the lines from Book 1 are. (*Table 1* sums up the correspondences between the three quotations.) It is in fact here that Milton’s paraphrase of Genesis 1 begins, and the bulk of the first verse is also included: four of the five meaningful words of Genesis 1:1 (*beginning, God, created, heaven, earth*) are cited here while only three in the earlier invocation. What is conspicuously missing, however, is the sentence initial phrase “in the beginning.” Rosenblatt is thus overstating his case. What is left out of Raphael’s narrative is not Genesis 1:1 only its opening phrase—but that recognition only makes the omission even more striking, especially if we bear in mind what exegetical scrutiny those words were subject to both prior to and in Milton’s days.⁵

Why is it missing?

Rosenblatt’s dynamism explanation hardly works in my estimate. His contrast between the imitation of “the dynamic, evolving nature that never achieves stasis” and the description of “a completed act” is spurious. We have seen above that the difference between the two epic versions is not so much the presence and absence of God’s—completed—creative act as the temporal specification that the act took place “in the beginning”. In fact, *Paradise Lost* 7.232 describes “a completed act” every bit as much as, if not more than, Genesis 1:1 or lines 1.9–10. We need to look elsewhere for an explanation.

⁴ Some ten lines later there is another allusion, but it need not concern us here: “thou from the first / Wast present, and with mighty wings outspread / Dovelike sats brooding on the vast abyss / And mad’st it pregnant” (1.19–22), cf. Gen 1:2b and *PL* 7.234–37, quoted below.

⁵ On ancient interpretations of the “beginning”, see Kugel 53–55; on Renaissance commentaries, Williams 40–41.

The answer, I propose, is so obvious that it can be easily overlooked. The phrase in question is missing because the creation of heaven and earth is *not* in the beginning for Milton. He has to drop the temporal designation because it could not be maintained truthfully. What he is about to recount does not constitute the beginning of his story in at least three significant ways: (a) structurally, (b) narratologically, and (c) chronologically.

Structurally, “in the beginning” comes at the beginning of Genesis 1:1. It is the first verse of the first chapter, the opening phrase of the whole book and, indeed, of the whole Bible, whether Jewish or Christian. By contrast, when Raphael gets as far as launching his creation narrative, he is already 232 lines into the book, which itself is the seventh of twelve, that is, we are literally in the middle of *Paradise Lost*, not at its beginning. At this point, the phrase would simply not have the same kind of power it has, due to its structural position, in Genesis, to which it gave its Hebrew name (*Bereshit*).

Milton’s theory of narrative accommodation is well known.⁶ It is fleshed out most fully in the very section we are now scrutinising. After some prefatory material,⁷ Raphael’s creation narrative begins with the Father’s speech in 7.139–73 rather than with a paraphrase of Genesis 1:1. Commenting on that speech, in which the Father declares his intent to create and commands the Son to carry it out, Raphael explains:

So spake the almighty, and to what he spake
His Word, the filial Godhead, gave effect.
Immediate are the Acts of God, more swift
Than time or motion, but to human ears
Cannot without process of speech be told,
So told as earthly notion can receive. (7.174–79)

The narrative that follows is creation at two removes. The first level of mediation is between the Father and the Son: the former speaks, the latter executes creation. But the latter is still incomprehensible in its immediacy to human understanding so a second level of mediation is needed. God’s acts are instantaneous, but they must be accommodated to limited (dilated) human capacities through the process of speech. The result of this twofold mediation is a rather complex relationship between narrative and narrated reality. So the question arises, when exactly, in the narrative, does creation take place?

That question itself does not ignore Milton’s complex arrangement and does not imply undue oversimplification. Surely, part of Milton’s point is precisely the irreducible complexity of the twofold mediation, but to insist that a quasi-point-like creative event is altogether beyond our reach is equally to reduce Milton’s structure,

⁶ It has also been subject to some critical debate since Patrides’ classic study, cf., e.g., Graves’ “Theory,” but my concern is with Milton’s narrative technique rather than its metaphysical implications as discussed by Graves, esp. in “Whole fulness.” Of its numerous treatments, see esp. Shirley’s, who focuses on Book 7.

⁷ For details, see my forthcoming paper in *The King James Bible* volume.

which tries to keep *both* sides, the divine and the human, in play. To raise the problem of where to pinpoint the moment of creation, which the text posits at one level, is to recognise that Milton wants to solve, rather than sidestep, the narratological difficulty.

The second level of mediation, Raphael's account of the hexaemeron, is clearly due to human limitations. The first level between Father and Son, however, is intrinsic to the nature of divine agency. The Father declares his intent to create:

in a moment will create
 Another world . . .
 And thou my Word, begotten Son, by thee
 This I perform, speak thou, and be it done:
 My overshadowing spirit and might with thee
 I send along, ride forth, and bid the deep
 Within appointed bounds be heaven and earth,
 Boundless the deep, because I am who fill
 Infinitude, nor vacuous the space. (7.154–69)

The modal auxiliary *will* in 7.154 subtly signals that this, in Searlean terms, is not yet a declaration but a commissive. But a temporal, rather than merely notional or narrative, distinction between the Father's directive to the Son and the perlocutionary effect of those words is far more difficult to maintain. The divine will is effected by the Word, and the subtle interplay between speech and action in divine agency is beautifully captured by line 164. The Father *says* that he *performs* an act—yet the actual performance of what is spoken by him is left to the Son, who is nevertheless commanded to *speak* in order that the deed be *done* (performed). Surely, what the Father says in lines 166–67 and what the Son does in 218–31 are both simultaneous and instantaneous as is retrospectively confirmed by the narrator (174–76). Yet on the level of narration they are separated by some fifty lines because we have no direct access to divine immediacy.

Consequently, the Father's instruction to the Son, later performed and then summed up in our foundational text (7.232) arguably captures the moment of creation in *Paradise Lost*. That conclusion is supported by the fact that the lines in question—"bid the deep / Within appointed bounds be heaven and earth" (7.166–67)—are themselves a loose paraphrase of Genesis 1:1. That, I submit, is the second reason why "in the beginning" had to be removed from the head of "the interlinear commentary" on the creation story, namely, for narratological reasons. The whole narrative that begins there is simply accommodation, and by 7.232 we are some seventy lines into the "beginning".

The creation of heaven and earth as narrated in that line is predated by much epic action, the bulk of Books 5 and 6. It is not simply that the Bible's *ab ovo* structure is replaced with an *in medias res* arrangement by Milton whereby the chronological beginning of the story appears structurally in the middle of the narrative. In *Paradise Lost*, the episode described in Genesis 1 is not the chronologically first event in the overall plotline. Milton's story begins with the

anointing of the Son (5.574–615) and its convoluted aftermath, the three-day war in heaven, followed by a nine-day fall (6.871–77) and the rebels’ nine-day stupor (1.50–53).⁸ That is the third, chronological, reason why “in the beginning” had to be removed from Book 7.

In other words, Milton’s story does not begin with a grand event that culminates in the creation of humanity. Rather, his starting point is the elevation of the Son.⁹ This distinction is so crucial to Milton that he is willing to sacrifice one of the strongest phrases in Genesis to make the point. It is important to understand that the new arrangement doesn’t *negate* the significance of creation (even that of humanity) but *relativises* it. To see this more fully, we must attend to the third question.

Where is it relocated?

Where is, then, Milton’s “beginning”? What is the event that he finds worthy to designate as “the beginning”? The very word occurs only half a dozen times in the entire text of the epic. Four of them can be easily dispensed with. First, when Satan, on his way to discover the newly created world, spots Uriel at the sphere of the sun, the narrator comments:

Glad was the spirit impure; as now in hope
To find who might direct his wandering flight
To Paradise the happy seat of man,
His journey’s end and our *beginning* woe. (3.630–33)¹⁰

The relevant phrase contains the key word in its adjectival sense, and it very specifically refers to the beginning of humanity’s sinfulness and perilous postlapsarian existence. In a similar fashion, the brief synopsis at the head of Book 5, summarising Raphael’s conversation with Adam, uses the participial form. The angel “minds Adam of his state and of his enemy; relates at Adam’s request who that enemy is, and how he came to be so, *beginning* from his first revolt in heaven, and the occasion thereof” (Argument 5). The beginning here spoken of is the beginning of Satan’s enmity. Incidentally, it is very close to the first distinct event of the narrative, the Son’s anointing, but the text here makes a more limited claim. It only traces Satan’s story, not the epic’s grand theme, to its origins.

⁸ The critical debate about the precise temporal relationship of the latter details to the six-day creation need not concern us here. For an influential reconstruction, see Fowler’s in Milton 31; for a revisionist reading, see Zivley 119–20.

⁹ Cf. Anderson, “Fall of Satan” and *Genesis of Perfection*, ch. 1. Anderson’s readings are relevant for my larger, christological, point as well.

¹⁰ Italics added here and in the following quotations.

Third, in the introduction to his autobiographical account to Raphael, Adam, taking his hint from the angel's reflections on the difficulty of narration,¹¹ muses: "For man to tell how human life began / Is hard; for who himself *beginning* knew?" (8.250–51). The syntax of the rhetorical question allows for various interpretations, mainly depending on what part of speech *beginning* is taken to be. If it is a participle, it modifies *himself*, which is in turn the object of *knew*. The meaning is either 'who knew himself when his life started?' or 'who knows that his life had a beginning?' It is also possible to consider *beginning* as a noun and *himself* as an emphatic pronoun: 'who knew the origin of things?' This reading, however, is less contextually encouraged, and, at any rate, it does not identify the ultimate beginning only ponders its comprehensibility to created minds.

Finally, in the last invocation of the epic the narrator reveals something of the prehistory of the creative process: "Since first this subject for heroic song / Pleased me long choosing, and beginning late . . ." (9.25–26). Again, this is a participial occurrence modifying *me*. And here the beginning referred to is not even that of the overall authorial undertaking but much more specifically that of the actual writing process when the topic was already chosen and its development commenced.

With the possible punning exception of 8.251, none of these *beginnings* are nouns. And they all refer to specific beginnings (of the sinfulness of humanity, of Satan's enmity, of Adam's life, and of the writing process). None of them qualifies as Milton's alternative to the biblical claim in Genesis 1:1. That leaves us with two passages to consider.

The first we have already seen in the opening invocation:

Sing heavenly Muse, that on the secret top
Of Oreb, or of Sinai, didst inspire
That shepherd, who first taught the chosen seed,
In the beginning how the heavens and earth
Rose out of chaos . . .

(1.6–10)

This is a paraphrase of Genesis 1:1, the beginning of the Bible—at the beginning of the epic. Further, the key phrase in line 9 is a hapax; it is the only occurrence of the complete phrase "in the beginning" in the entire epic.

The other passage comes from Raphael's dialogue with Adam:

And thy request think now fulfilled, that asked
How first this world and face of things began,
And what before thy memory was done
From the beginning . . .

(7.635–38)

¹¹ Cf. Lewalski convincingly argues that Adam's spiritual autobiography develops a genre invented by Eve (211), but his protestations of the difficulties involved have no counterparts in her spontaneous drift into the relation (4.440–52).

This is another single occurrence: “from the beginning” is also a hapax in *Paradise Lost*. And this is the only other instance in the epic where *beginning* unequivocally appears as a noun. In significant divergence from its counterpart in Book 1, the word here comes at the *end* of the narrative and has a retrospective reference—with ambiguous anchoring. We are now at the end of Book 7, the Miltonic paraphrase of Genesis 1. With these words Raphael is wrapping up his creation narrative: “How first this world and face of things began[.]” In this context, the beginning mentioned two lines later is obviously the *beginning* of Genesis 1:1. The difference between the two accounts, in the Bible and in Book 7, is that the former declares at the outset that there is nothing that would have preceded the events with which it starts while the latter only reveals at the end of the narrative that the story was told “from the beginning”. At 7.638, however, we are also at the end of Books 5 to 7, which contain the narrative of *all* previous history: “And what before thy memory was done[.]” If the clause initial *and* is understood in an additive sense, this line may reference the war in heaven in a broad sense. In that case the “beginning” from which things have been told is the beginning of the complete action in *Paradise Lost*, that is, the Son’s anointing.

We have, then, two nominal beginnings in the epic (pun intended). The beginning of “in the beginning” in 1.9 and the beginning of “from the beginning” in 7.638. The first is biblical and anthropological. It is the beginning of the created world, which is given to Adam for dominion.¹² The second is Miltonic and christological or, to use an awkward but more precise term, messianological.¹³ It is the beginning of all things, which, on Milton’s view as presented in *Paradise Lost*, extend far beyond the relative confines of the cosmos¹⁴ and the story of humankind. Milton is taking pains to distinguish his cosmological vision from that of the Bible structurally: the grand narrative of all things does not begin with an event that culminates in the creation of humans. The implication is christological. The ultimate starting point of Milton’s universal history is the anointing of the Son.

Milton thus offers two potentially rival beginnings—potentially because they are rivals in certain ways, that is, as “ultimate” beginnings. But as the four previous occurrences, which I termed easily dispensable, have taught us, there can be legitimate specific beginnings within the grand story.

So where is the beginning for Milton? The easy answer is, somewhere in the middle. A more accurate answer, however, would be: where we choose it to be. That, I suggest, is Milton’s invitation to us. He gives us a genuine choice—but not a light one. Whatever we choose will have its consequences. And there can be genuinely wrong choices with devastating consequences in the world of *Paradise Lost*.

¹² Cf. 4.429–32, 7.530–34, 8.545–46, 12.67–69, and Gen 1:26.

¹³ Throughout the epic, Milton consistently avoids using the Greek word “Christ” in favour of the Hebrew title.

¹⁴ A term Milton never used but which has its justification, see my essay on “The Structure of Milton’s Universe” 34.

An obvious case in point would be Satan's doctrine of uncreatedness, touched upon several times in Books 1 and 2 but spelled out in detail to Abdiel during the night of rebellion in heaven:

That we were formed then sayst thou? And the work
Of secondary hands, by task transferred
From Father to his Son? Strange point and new!
Doctrine which we would know whence learned: who saw
When this creation was? Rememberst thou
Thy making, while the maker gave thee being?
We know no time when we were not as now;
Know none before us, self-begot, self-raised
By our own quickening power . . . (5.853–61)

Adam's later contemplation on the difficulty of knowing one's beginnings will, of course, provide a corrective to Satan's faulty argumentation here. It is precisely the denial of the Son's pre-eminence—in other words, the rejection of the “beginning” of 7.638—that constitutes the heavenly hosts' rebellion. Choosing the wrong beginning, which here means the denial of the right origins, is tantamount to the ultimate act of disobedience. The epistemological difficulty by no means justifies a faulty identification of the beginning.

Adam's fate offers another warning. When the Son finally comes to pronounce judgment on him, he sentences him with these words: thou shalt “return unto the ground, for thou / Out of the ground wast taken, know thy birth, / For dust thou art, and shalt to dust return” (10.207–08). “[K]now thy birth”—a conspicuous insertion into the biblical paraphrase¹⁵—serves several functions. It is an emphatic reminder for Adam to recall his beginning as once he knew it aright. It alludes to his act of disobedience. Had he kept his birth in mind, he would have remembered his duty to God.¹⁶ But more is at stake here. The allusion to the beginning also grounds the final verdict. And that signals the real risk: the choice about the beginning is also a choice about the ultimate destiny. Milton knows it is difficult (cf. 8.250–51), but he invites us to look beyond ourselves, even our collective selves, and find the answer to our beginning, and our ultimate end, in God. It must be added, however, that, as we have seen, such a choice still allows for more proximate beginnings, provided they are not absolutised.

¹⁵ Cf. “till thou return unto the ground; for out of it wast thou taken: for dust thou *art*, and unto dust shalt thou return” (Gen 3:19, KJV, italics original). Further on these lines, see my “Fall and Redemption” 47.

¹⁶ Cf. the earlier rhetorical question, “Was she [Eve] thy God, that her thou didst obey / Before his voice[?]” (10.145–46).

Conclusion

To sum up, Milton removed the Bible's famous opening phrase "in the beginning" from Raphael's paraphrase of Genesis 1 in Book 7 because it would have been out of place there. His hexaemeral account does not constitute the epic's beginning structurally, narratologically, or chronologically. But the rearrangement also points to a larger shift in perspective, replacing an anthropological with a christological focus. The reader is invited to adjust her own perception to that more encompassing view.

Three interrelated observations follow from the foregoing analysis in conclusion. First, the beginning is relocated for reasons internal to Milton's undertaking and deeply woven into the poem's fabric. The celebrated phrase of Genesis 1:1 would be aesthetically much less powerful if buried in the middle of the epic. Similarly, the six days of creation do not fit at the beginning of Milton's overall plotline. Further, given Milton's theory of accommodation, the text cannot simply capture the moment of divine creativity. By the time the narrative proceeds to the biblical beginning, the paternal speech act, itself narrated to set up and retrospectively illustrate the larger conceptual framework, is already completed. The narratological delay is inescapable and undermines an easy identification of "the beginning". Yet the rearrangement is significant not only for aesthetic reasons in the broad sense but has major theological repercussions as well. The Miltonic beginning does not merely avoid poetically unsatisfactory solutions. It throws new light on humanity and puts it in perspective, specifically, in a christological perspective.

Milton's version is offered not so much as a corrective to the biblical narrative as a right interpretation of it. I noted above that the omission is surprising in the light of the exegetical tradition's interest in those words. Elsewhere I have argued, however, that the reworking of Genesis in *Paradise Lost* exhibits sustained engagement with the interpretive tradition.¹⁷ Milton is aware of the questions posed but often provides his idiosyncratic answers to textual cruxes. The fate of the Bible's opening words is a case in point. He does treat of the problem, but instead of providing a "standard", e.g. Johannine–Augustinian, answer, he presents a variety which is informed by that tradition but is fully consistent with the monistic¹⁸ fabric of his epic. Milton does not identify the beginning with Wisdom as Jewish interpreters did or with Christ in the fashion of Christian exegetes. He nevertheless invests the phrase with christological significance and thereby relativises the beginnings of humankind, which is part and parcel of his overall poetical program of "justify[ing] the ways of God to men" (1.26). And that is the third point to note.

Aesthetic and theological aspects of Milton's work are distinguishable but not strictly separable in *Paradise Lost*. He carries out a theologically informed poetical program, in which narrative details have theological significance and theological positions are advanced not only through theological arguments but also through epic, dramatic, poetic means. Exegesis is here a mode of poetic existence, and poetry, a

¹⁷ See my forthcoming paper in *The King James Bible* volume.

¹⁸ On Milton's monism, see, e.g., Fish, and Graves, "Whole fullness."

form of theological reasoning. However minor a detail the relocation of the “beginning” from Raphael’s narrative seems, it is a typical instance of Milton’s working method and as such encapsulates the beauties and complexities of *Paradise Lost*.

Table 1 Genesis 1:1 in KJV and Paradise Lost (Books 1 and 7)

Genesis 1:1–2 (KJV) ¹	Paradise Lost 1.9–10	Paradise Lost 7.232–35
<i>In the beginning</i> GOD CREATED <i>THE HEAVEN and THE EARTH.</i> And the earth was <u>without</u> FORM, AND VOID; and DARKNESS was upon the face of the <u>deep</u> . And THE SPIRIT OF GOD moved upon the face of the WATERS.	<i>In the beginning</i> how <i>the heavens and earth</i> Rose out of chaos: _____ _____ or if Sion hill Delight thee more, and Siloa's brook that flowed Fast by the oracle of God . . .	Thus GOD THE HEAVEN CREATED, thus THE EARTH, Matter <u>un</u> FORMED AND VOID: DARKNESS profound Covered the <u>abyss</u> : but on the WATERY calm His brooding wings THE SPIRIT OF GOD outspread . . .

Words in common between KJV and Book 1 are *italicised*.
Words in common between KJV and Book 7 are in SMALL CAPS.
Semantic equivalents between KJV and Book 7 are underlined.

¹ Original italics omitted.

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